TO YOUR HEALTH
John 5:1-9
September 17, 1978

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Students of our culture observe that heroes and heroines have disappeared from our literature, art, motion pictures, even television drama and comedy. Instead of larger than life, romanticized and exaggerated caricatures, modern culture now celebrates the ordinary, common and mundane: the most fashionable literary device is the anti-hero. The best mystery and suspense tales are no longer spun around a stylized Sherlock Holmes but a beach bum by the name of Travis McGee. The strong warriers of Battleground and Sands of Iwo Jima are replaced by the very fallible bumblers of Mash, and Father Knows Best has been supplanted by a father who doesn't know much of anything, a prototype anti-hero, Archie Bunker.

A sad development for the romantics among us, and yet when it comes to the Bible, I confess that I have always been drawn by the vivid humanity of the ordinary men and women who hold center stage. I confess that I take comfort in the Biblical assertion that God can work His will through people who act like people I know, and that Jesus could love men who expressed feelings and emotions and pettiness and humanity that I see in myself.

My list includes Abraham, who volunteered his wife to Pharaoh in order to save his own skin, Moses, who preferred sheepherding to liberating his people, David, who didn't look like much of a hero when Bathsheba's husband returned on leave, Peter, who loved Jesus enough to die for Him one minute and the next was vehemently denying that he knew the man, Paul, who became so angry with his brothers and sisters in Galatia that he wished they would mutilate themselves. Near the head of my list is the pathetic character who limps across the stage in the lesson this morning. This is a man I can understand.

For thirty-eight years he had been lying beside the pool of Bethzatha in Jerusalem, waiting to be healed of his affliction. The pool was said to have curative powers whenever the underground spring that fed it began to flow. When that happened the first person in the pool would be cured. And so he had sat there for nearly four decades, waiting. I imagine that he was serious about it at first, but having been pushed aside so many times, having failed so frequently, he had simply given up and made peace with his condition. He had his pallet, the camaraderie of the other beggars and cripples, the sympathy and alms of the passersby. My hunch has always been that we are dealing here with a man who enjoyed his ill health.

How else to explain the rather rude question Jesus asked when He encountered the man? "Do you want to be healed?" I've known a few brusque doctors but none who ever opened the initial conversation with a patient by questioning the patient's sincerety and integrity. That's what Jesus did. And then He issued an order: "Take up your pallet and walk." "Get up, alone; you don't need any help to be healed; you can do it by yourself."

At least one way to interpret the story in John 5 is that the man had the potential in himself to affect his own healing all along: that he either didn't realize that or was too lazy to do it or too frightened to try: that the healing gift of our Lord, in this instance at least, was the prodding of a man into using his own resources.

The subject of healing in the Bible is an intriguing one. New Testament scholars agree that regardless of how uncomfortable it makes us it is simply not possible to eliminate the topic from the life and ministry of Jesus. He came teaching and preaching and healing.

It was a time that believed that the very air was full of demons: that physical illness was the result of demon possession. We know a little bit about the power of suggestion: text books warn about something called "medical students' disease", the common phenomenon of reading about a particular illness and almost invariably imagining the symptoms in oneself. Husbands of expectant women have been known to develop all sorts of curious familiar symptoms including labor pains. William Barclay observed in The Mind of Jesus, that widespread belief in demons probably caused a lot of physical illness, but it also made possible dramatic and immediate cures if the sick person believed that the demon had been banished. Some of the healing of Jesus, I believe, may be understood in this context.

In any event, healing was a central point of his ministry: His disciples and the early Christian community followed suit. The apostles were sent out to teach, preach and heal. Annointing the sick with oil was a common practice in the early Church and became one of the seven sacraments of the Church of Rome. However, over the years the healing emphasis was lost as the sacrament came to be known as Extreme Unction or the "last rites". Curiously, what originally was intended for healing became the visible confirmation that healing wasn't going to happen. The presence of the priest at the sick bed was identified in the popular mind, not with the healing love of God, but with the verdict that nothing else could be done and the end was near. It is impossible to calculate the impact that shift has had on our understanding of illness and the relationship of religion with physical health. But every minister knows that for some people at least his appearance in a hospital room is a reminder not of a God who wills life and health but of the imminence of death. It is not uncommon to be greeted with "It's nice to see you, Reverend, but I'm not that sick, am I?"

There has always been a lingering interest in faith healing and faith healers. I remain skeptical about the whole business: I have seen hopes raised falsely and pocketbooks opened desperately. Dr. William Nolan has written an excellent book on Healing in which he concludes, after exhaustive research, that there simply is no evidence of cures which cannot be explained in some other way. And yet, there is today, on the side of both medical science and theology, an openness to discuss and explore the whole area anew. There is in both fields a return to our philosophic roots; to the old Hebrew concept of the individual human being which sees the person as a whole instead of separate divisions or categories.

The Greek notion, and the accepted underlying philosophy in Western Civilization for centuries, is that the person is made up of three distinct parts: body, mind and spirit. There are, accordingly, professions which deal with each. The body is the responsibility of the physician. The mind belongs to the psychiatrist and what remains - the spirit - is the domain of the clergy.

The Hebrew concept regards those divisions as artificial and inaccurate. The person is a unity, and it is not possible to focus on a contrived aspect of the individual apart from his or her wholeness. If we must use the terms "body, mind and spirit", it is not possible to deal with one apart from the other two. We know, in simple terms, about tension headaches and the fact that the physical symptom is attributable to something out of sync somewhere else in the person's life.

Years ago I was privileged to sit under Professor Granger Westberg at the University of Chicago. A Lutheran pastor and now one of the leading voices in the Wholistic Health movement, Westberg occupied a joint chair on the Medical and Divinity faculties. Westberg used to say, and his colleagues on the medical faculty

supported the statement, that half the people in the hospital really needed to talk to someone - like a pastor, or a counselor: that their illness was in fact more complex than isolated physical symptoms. Dr. Jerome Fisk of the Johns Hopkins Medical School in a commencement address in 1975, told the graduates that "any treatment of illness that does not also minister to the human spirit is grossly deficient." (Saturday Review, 2/18/78).

Now, all of this has been precipitated by my lingering fondness for that man who sat for thirty-eight years waiting to be healed, and was restored to health, when someone finally forced him to use his own resources. And in part it is precipitated by two intriguing articles by Norman Cousins which appeared in Saturday Review in April of 1977 and February of this year. It's a fascinating story and I'd like to share part of it with you.

Cousins ended up in the hospital in 1964 with a disease of the connective tissue which specialists called progressively degenerative and incurable. His chances of recovery, he was told, were one in five hundred. Now Cousins is no ordinary patient, and no ordinary human being, for that matter, and he began to read about his disease. He concluded that his condition could be due to adrenal exhaustion and he learned that emotional tension is sometimes the culprit. He wrote later, "If negative emotions produce negative chemical changes in the body, wouldn't the positive emotions produce positive chemical changes? Is it possible that love, hope, faith, laughter, confidence and the will to live have therapeutic value?" (Saturday Review 5/28/77, Anatomy of an Illness).

With very little to lose, and with the full cooperation of his physician he mounted a treatment plan that was unusual to say the least. He removed himself from pain killers, took massive doses of ascorbic acid, and then went to work on the positive emotions. With the help of his good friend Allen Funt he watched taped Candid Camera Classics to make him laugh. Hospital nurses read to him from books of humor. He writes: "I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep." (Ibid, p.48).

Even more incredibly, his blood tests began to improve as well. When the laughter eminating from his room began to disturb the other patients, he was moved to a motel, where under his doctor's close scrutiny, he continued his plan of treatment.

To make a long story short, Norman Cousins returned to work at Saturday Review, to horseback riding, tennis and practicing Bach on the organ, none of which he was expected to do again. He came to two conclusions: "The will to live is not a theoretical abstraction but a physiologic reality with therapeutic characteristics", and that he was "incredibly fortunate to have a doctor who knew that the patient's will to live and own resources were the best weapons against the illness."

Cousins is careful not to go too far. He prescribes nothing for anyone else but simply reports his own experience. Three thousand physicians responded in letters to Cousins, overwhelmingly enthusiastic and supportive. When he wrote a follow-up article a year later he observed that the letters "demolished any notion that physicians are universally resistant to psychological, moral or spiritual factors in the healing process." (Saturday Review, 2/18/78).

It would be an error to deduce from this that I am advocating self treatment; quite to the contrary. If you do not feel well, see a doctor. And if anyone wants a field trip in the modern miracles of healing I would recommend a tour of a modern hospital - miracles happen there every day. What I am advocating is a change in attitude which makes you a full partner in the healing process: an appreciation of the importance your attitude plays in that process: a regard for the fact that you have resources for healing in yourself, a sensitivity to your own wholeness and a consequent openness to the truth that your physical well-being is closely related to your mind and spirit as well. I am advocating an attitude which regards God, not as a neutral observer when we are sick, but a powerful resource, a comforting presence, a healing force which seeks to work through both physician and patient.

Now return for a moment to the man on the porch waiting to be healed. And allow me to suggest that part of what this story is about is a definition of health far broader than the mere absence of sick symptoms. Health, in the Bible, is positive, not negative. It is a sense of total well-being, wholeness. It is possible, in Biblical terms, to be healthy and still crippled, in fact dying - but still very healthy. Health in the Bible is zest, life lived fully, and that is really what was wrong with this pathetic character. He wasn't only sick physically, he was missing life. He wasn't taking any chances and he was, for all practical purposes, already dead. Jesus Christ, Savior, delivered him from that by forcing him to pick up his bed and walk back into life. I don't expect it was easy for the man: in fact, I imagine that there were days when he missed the safety and security of his sickness. But now he was alive - whole - healthy.

I shall always remember a television special aired last spring. Fred Astaire and Helen Hayes portrayed an elderly couple facing that most severe of crises, serious illness and separation. The old gentleman has an acute heart condition. The prescription is complete rest in a residential care facility. He goes to the Nursing Home unwillingly and immediately begins to deteriorate: he is cranky with the staff, his moods are consistently depressed, his appetite suffers - he "gives up". His wife, in the meantime, is having difficulty arguing with her daughter about the need to drive to the Nursing Home daily. Life and health return as both of them decide symbolically to take up their pallets and walk, to take charge of the future: she by getting a part-time job; he by arranging for an apartment where they can live together again. It may cost him years, his doctor warns, but they agree that it is quality of life, not quantity that counts. For them health and wholeness is being together.

> "time to be quiet, without talking," she says...
> "time to fight the way we want to," he says...
> " to reach out and touch whenever we feel like it," she says.

And I thought again about a sentence Norman Cousins wrote: "Death is not the ultimate tragedy of life. The ultimate tragedy is depersonalization - dying in an alien and sterile arena, separated from the spiritual nourishment that comes from being able to reach out to a loving hand." (Saturday Review, 2/18/78).

Jesus Christ calls us to wholeness - to life in all its fullness - to love with all its risks and dangers. We may carry with us the symptoms of physical illness: He calls us to draw on His strength to live in spite of them. The greatest privilege of the Gospel ministry is to witness that; to be by the bedside of someone seriously ill who is still vibrantly alive, in love with life, full of joy and warmth and humanity. The power of God - the God who gives life and wills full life - is always there for me.

To a pathetic man who had been waiting for thirty-eight years for health Jesus said, "Rise, take up your pallet and walk." On His behalf, may I presume to say the same to you?

Rise, take up your pallet and walk.

Amen.

Our Father, we are grateful for the gift of life: its wonder and mystery; for our bodies and minds and spirits. For health and wholeness we give thanks: for the skill of our doctors and nurses - and in and through it all, for your love: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.